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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing awareness of the need for workplace literacy programs to focus on adults' personal needs and interests and on long-term employment needs, many worker education programs for adults learning English as a Second Language continue to limit themselves to specific training for particular jobs. The Hastings Institute, Inc., a non-profit corporation of the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, developed the Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program for Vancouver City employees. This writing-based, learner-centered program is one of several that are influencing the design of worker literacy education across Canada and the United States. This digest describes the needs of Vancouver's linguistically and vocationally diverse workforce, and the city's response to those needs. The worker education program designed by the Hastings Institute is described, typical questions about the program are answered, and the success and spread of the program is highlighted. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC Digest

A Learner-Centered Worker Education Program

By Gary Pharness, Hasting Institute

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

A Learner-Centered Worker Education Program

by Gary Pharness, Hastings Institute

Our experience has been that the process of learners discovering their voices as writers is the most dramatic step toward becoming literate. (Pharness & Weinstein, 1988, p. 37)

Despite increasing awareness of the need for workplace literacy programs to focus on adults' personal needs and interests and on current and long-term employment needs, many worker education programs for adults learning English as a second language continue to limit themselves to specific training for particular jobs. They often follow a prescribed curriculum in which all learners cover the same material and focus on the acquisition of basic language skills, a curriculum devoid of content or linked to particular workplace situations and tasks (Kazemek, 1985).

To remedy this situation, The Hastings Institute, Inc., a nonprofit corporation of the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, developed the Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program (VMWLP) for Vancouver City employees. This writing-based, learner-centered program is one of several that are influencing the design of worker literacy education across Canada and the United States (see also Jurmo, 1991, for discussion of the features and importance of this type of program, and Sarmiento & Kay, 1990, and Soifer, Young, & Irwin, 1989, for examples of other programs of this type).

The Need: Working with a Diverse Workforce

The workforce of the City of Vancouver is linguistically and vocationally diverse. The 9,000 workers come from 35 different countries, speak 40 different languages, and perform hundreds of different jobs. Approximately 30% are not native English speakers, and many have had little or no recent schooling. The Hastings Institute needs assessment among this population found that many of these workers had difficulty communicating orally with co-workers and performing the reading and writing tasks required in their jobs. These workers felt isolated and lonely, disconnected from the activities of their co-workers. They often did not participate in on-the-job training opportunities and so faced limited prospects for advancement. They also had unfulfilled personal literacy goals—to read and write for personal pleasure and information, to encourage and assist their children in school, and so on. The need for an educational program was clear, but no one curriculum could be responsive to the tremendously diverse population, with a wide range of personal and vocational goals.

The Response: Program Description

The Hastings Institute designed a worker education program that would be responsive to learners' various backgrounds and personal needs and address the particular workplace issues that learners struggled with. Philosophically congruent with the Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, British Columbia (described in Rigg, 1990; Pharness & Weinstein, 1988), program staff assume that literacy is primarily a personal need, not a tool for performing a particular job. The program emphasizes language use as the basis for critical thinking and individualized learning. Trained and experienced instructors work with learners to determine individual learner needs and instruction. Learners move gradually from personal to professional reading and writing, from individual to collaborative work, and from work with instructors to leadership among peers. The following features characterize the program.

• **The learner sets the direction and pace of the program.** The program revolves around listening to learners' needs, trusting that they know what they need to learn, and giving them the freedom to direct their own learning. Entry into the program begins with an informal interview with an instructor to determine the learner's strengths and learning goals. The learner is encouraged to talk about his or her life, beliefs, values, and expectations in a safe, open environment that honors and builds on the learner's knowledge and values. At the end of the interview, the learner and instructor together establish a course of instruction. One learner may want to pass the test for getting a license to practice a trade and need to learn the vocabulary of the trade. Another may want to learn the skills necessary for a particular job (e.g., taking minutes, supervising other workers, or running meetings). Another may be at the early stages of learning oral and written English. These goals and needs are discussed in the interview and the reading, writing, and oral discussion that the learner does with the rest of the class are shaped accordingly.

Participants' life experiences serve as the foundation for all language activities, oral and written. Personal experience gradually and naturally flows into workplace issues and skills. The learner who needs to learn specialized vocabulary begins to focus on that; the learner needing to learn minute-taking takes minutes of class meetings; and so on.

The VMWLP adheres to the philosophy that we learn to live, not to earn. Therefore, the program does not focus first on management or union goals for improvement of specific skills, increased productivity, or worker solidarity. Instead, the VMWLP sees education as a means for workers to confront personal literacy issues and address those issues through using language—speaking, writing, reading, and listening—as the basis for thinking. This focus ultimately serves both management and union: Personal investment and confidence in one's own literacy become a powerful basis for literacy in the workplace.

There is no exit test at the end of the program. Instead, at the end of each 12-week session, learner and instructor decide together, based on the learner's goals and progress, whether the learner will continue in another session. Many complete three or more sessions,

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although their employer pays for only the first session.

• **Language is thinking.** The VMWLP runs on the principle that both reading and writing are based on thinking, not on sets of subskills. If it can be said, it can be written; if it can be written, it can be read. As one learner put it, "You write the story that's in your head. When I went to school, I only learned rules from the books and teachers. Here I learn the rules from my writing and reading and speaking." Another learner said, "When I start remembering, it is hard to know where to stop. I just keep writing."

Reading and writing are not taught in isolation; rather, reading, writing, listening, and speaking flow naturally from one to the other. Oral discussion and careful, critical listening are as important as writing. Sharing and helping others are as important as producing one's own work. Class meetings begin with whole- or small-group discussion of topics initiated by learners: workplace issues that an individual is struggling with, workplace materials that someone brings in, a text that someone in the class has written, or a reading that someone finds provocative. Learners are encouraged to choose anything they want to read from the extensive library. Discussion flows from or into reading and writing.

There is no prescribed curriculum, so a learner can enter the program at any time. After one 3-hour session, new learners usually understand what the classes are about, recognize the importance of their own input, see how learners help other learners, and come to realize that language study, in all its manifestations, is a natural activity.

All learners are encouraged and expected to write as early as their first day in the program, even if they know very little English or if writing begins with crude stick figure drawings (for discussion of some of the writing strategies used, see Crandall & Pharness, in press). The primary emphasis is on thinking through writing. On their first day in the program, all students receive a blank notebook, which becomes their text. They fill it with writing, which provides material for reading. As the writing portfolio grows and written language replaces pictures, learners become more confident and take more responsibility for shaping the kinds of writing and reading they do. Eventually, students' stories are published in *Words at Work* or *Voices*, student-published magazines.

• **Learning is a long-term process.** The program is based on the understanding that literacy acquisition is long-term and needs the support and collaboration of everyone in the workplace. Therefore, the Hastings Institute seeks to work only with unions, employers, and funders who are committed to long-term programs that continue for a number of years, not just a few months.

Typical Questions About the Program

Observers raise two major questions about the VMWLP: (1) How does this program constitute *workplace* literacy? (2) How do staff know if the students are learning? The answer to the first is that literacy cannot be divided neatly into domains—workplace, home, or school. The goal of the program is to help learners discover meaning and significance in *everything* they discuss, read, and write. Initially, material from the learner's own experience is the most important material to be written and read. In a short time, learners provide their own direction to the program by deciding what to read and write to meet their workplace needs.

The second question is addressed by a number of indicators: individual writing portfolios, the ways learners ask questions of and respond to other learners, the ways learners see their own and others' progress, comments by supervisors at the workplace. All contribute to the picture of learner progress (see Lytle & Wolfe, 1989, for discussion of multiple qualitative measures to assess learner progress).

Success and Spread of the Program

Although most adult literacy programs experience high dropout rates, only 2 of 120 students enrolled in the VMWLP from January 1990 to June 1991 failed to complete the session. Other indicators of program success are more qualitative: Program participants are entering jobs that were once thought to be beyond their reach; others are moving from auxiliary worker status to full-time employment; supervisors report that workers are more communicative and more likely to assume leadership roles. Learners report that they function better at home (reading to their children, understanding their finances) and at work (speaking at union meetings, communicating with peers, becoming participating members of committees).

The program is being implemented or is in the planning stages at a number of worksites—restaurants, hotels, hospitals, a long-term psychiatric care facility—and with workers in the logging, mining, and transportation industries.

Conclusion

A perpetual concern in adult education is whether to equip learners with specific knowledge and skills or to help them discover and articulate their own experiences and pursue their own interests. In adult worker education, educating the whole person rather than providing training in specific skills may take more time, but it may also result in workers learning *how* to learn, how to solve problems, how to work as a team, and how to pursue a lifelong career in the changing workplace.

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